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Buenos Aires

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Washington, D.C. 20520

ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

(X) Release ( ) Excise ( ) Deny

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Date Declassify on Reason

Dear Mac:

In the Ambassador's absence I am replying to your letter of August 31. We can easily understand your concern about the August disappearances and particularly your need for some assessment of what they mean. Anticipating your need we have spent several extended sessions in the morning meetings trying to form a plausible hypothesis. So far we have not been able to come up with any convincing explanation. We all agree that the August disappearances make no sense. Bill Hallman speculates (admittedly with no evidence) that with heightened anxiety among the security forces about the IAHR visit, Videla-Viola are being forced to prove their loyalty to the troops by authorizing a few abductions of persons the services portray as terrorists. None of the Country Team members was able to improve on this speculation, though it can be argued that the top Commandants probably did not approve the operations, but had to accept them once they were carried out.

We are generally agreed that the operating orders permitting the abduction of real terrorists have probably not changed. Since last December the definition of a terrorist has apparently been made more rigorous. Whether the events of August represent a backsliding, provocation by dissident units or some genuinely out of control element, is anybody's guess. Some sources are leading us to believe that there may be a publicity circus surrounding the formal charging of some of the August disappeared who will turn out to have been serious terrorists with large arms caches. Though we agree this would be at best

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bizarre, you cannot entirely discount it as a possibility, or at least a gleam in some Colonel's eye. The reports that the disappeared were either FAP members or were associated with the infiltration of the Montoneros appear to me to be convenient justification, with perhaps a kernel of truth in the FAP membership. We have always been skeptical of the reports of Montonero broadcasts interrupting TV and until last week had never been able to find a person who had first-hand information on such broadcasts. Bill now thinks he has a reliable confirmation from one of Bob Cox's sources, but that is a very slender basis for confirming events which should be widely known. When the Ambassador returns from the U.S. I am sure he will put some tough questions to General Viola, who may be able to shed some light on what has been going on, though I doubt he will be very willing to do so. In the meantime, we will pass on anything which seems remotely plausible.

John Amott was much concerned by your report of the SDC Systems possible loss of the air traffic control systems contract. His information was slightly different and less alarming, but it was not clear whether it was subsequent to yours. We had been under the impression that SDC was going ahead with the bid and that their contacts in Munitions Control had advised them (informally) that the air defense aspect of the system was incidental and should not render the contract subject to Kennedy-Humphrey.

As of September 11 there has not been much reaction, public or official, to the Jack Anderson column. Since the State Department shares the demon's role in the column and almost seems to be the principal culprit, the impact of the story as written should be diminished here. Fortunately the local euphoria over the victory of the junior soccer team in the Tokyo world

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championships together with the news of the IAHRC has monopolized all attention.

While in Brasilia learning about the Foreign Service Act of 1979, the Political Officer there inquired about a Southern Cone arms race and a resumption of saber rattling over the Beagle Channel dispute. I tried to reassure him on both counts and you will see from the Beagle Channel reports which should reach you before this letter, that we are not alarmist on either count. The Argentines did spend a lot of money on weapons but almost all of it went for purchases planned previously or replacement of old systems. The Mirage V purchase did provide them with a new weapons system and the purchase of the French frigates does augment their fleet but neither of these purchases is relatively major. At the same time their A-4 aircraft are rapidly deteriorating for lack of spares and some of their Navy vessels have a difficult time leaving port. With the prospect of hostilities last December, the armed forces found it ideal to make maximum demands for whatever financing could be extorted from the Minister of Economy. I am told that our own Services have been known to use similar tactics. Provided the Vatican can keep this dispute in the air until next March, confrontation seems remote.

Our contributions to a human rights strategy will be forwarded to you by letter. This is not the ideal month for calm and measured reflection on policy matters, what with the Ambassador's departure, the UNITA XX visit, and far from least, my secretary's departure. One point you raised must be addressed, for I expect it is a fact of our situation: Argentina must make progress on return to representative government (Basket III) before progress on Basket I will be recognized sufficiently to eliminate legislative sanctions. So far we have worked hard to avoid this problem, always point-

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ing at the top priority which must be accorded to stopping the disappearances, torture and executions. Should the Argentine leopard change his spots this afternoon and abuses of human rights cease altogether, critics of the regime will probably be unrelenting and insist on elections. This is an extraordinarily sensitive topic with the GOA, and would be almost equally so with the public and politicians, for it goes directly to the "Braden or Peron" syndrome. Though we will be hard put to find ways of expressing our concerns about elections to the GOA, I believe that events will move in our direction. This military government knows it has to return to the barracks, probably sooner rather than later. It does not have a death-grip on political power, and knows that it could be swept out of office in a matter of weeks should events and economic reverses combine against it. Most important, the politicians are not really ready to resume business as usual - they are discredited for the most part, while the military have some residual legitimacy. This situation can and probably will change over the next year, but it means there is little pressure for political change within the leadership groups.

Sincerely,

Maxwell Chaplin

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